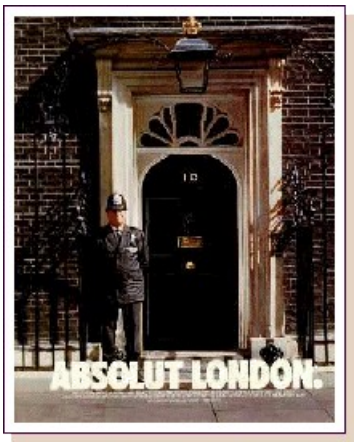
Semiotics for Beginners

Daniel Chandler

Intertextuality

Although Saussure stressed the importance of the relationship of signs to each other, one of the weaknesses of structuralist semiotics is the tendency to treat individual texts as discrete, closed-off entities and to focus exclusively on internal structures. As Gunther Kress notes, within a structuralist paradigm this problem can be addressed 'only if one looks at systems of structures (i.e. a new structure)' (Kress 1976, 93). The semiotic notion of intertextuality introduced by Julia Kristeva is associated primarily with *poststructuralist* theorists. Each media text exists in relation to others. In fact, texts owe more to other texts than to their own makers. Texts are framed by others in many ways. Most obvious are formal frames: a television programme, for instance, may be part of a series and part of a *genre* (such as *soap* or *sitcom)*. Our understanding of any individual text relates to such framings. Texts provide contexts within which other texts may be created and interpreted.



In order to make sense of the Absolut vodka advertisement shown here you need to know what to look for. Such expectations are established by reference to one's previous experience in looking at related advertisements in an extended series. Once we know that we are looking for the shape of the bottle, it is easier to perceive it here. As also in the Smirnoff advertisement above (where even the name of the product is absent), modern visual advertisements make extensive use of intertextuality in this way. Instant identification of the appropriate interpretative code serves to

identify the interpreter of the advertisement as a member of an exclusive club, with each act of interpretation serving to renew one's membership.

The assignment of a text to a genre provides the interpreter of the text with a key intertextual framework. Genre theory is an important field in its own right, and genre theorists do not necessarily embrace semiotics. For general reviews of genre theory see Feuer 1992 and Neale 1980; for an explicitly semiotic account see Fiske 1987, 109-115. Within semiotics genres can be seen as sign systems or codes - conventionalized but dynamic structures (see Feuer 1992, 143). Each example of a genre utilises conventions which link it to other members of that genre. Such conventions are at their most obvious in 'spoof' versions of the genre. But intertextuality is also reflected in the fluidity of genre boundaries and in the blurring of genres and their functions which is reflected in such recent coinages as 'advertorials', 'infomercials', 'edutainment', 'docudrama' and 'faction' (a blend of 'fact' and 'fiction').

Links also cross the boundaries of formal frames, for instance, in sharing topics with treatments within other genres (the theme of war is found in a range of genres such action-adventure film, documentary, news, current affairs). Some genres are shared by several media: the genres of *soap*, *game show* and *phone-in* are found on both television and radio; the genre of the *news report* is found on TV, radio and in newspapers; the *advertisement* appears in all mass media forms. Texts sometimes allude directly to each other as in 'remakes' of films, and in many amusing contemporary TV ads. Texts in the genre of the *trailer* are directly tied to specific texts within or outside the same medium. The genre of the *programme listing* exists within the medium of print (listings magazines, newspapers) to support the media of TV, radio and film. TV soaps generate substantial coverage in popular newspapers, magazines and books; the 'magazine' format was adopted by TV and radio. And so on.

As Tony Thwaites and his colleagues note, 'texts are elastic, and their frames or boundaries can always be redrawn by readers' (Thwaites *et al.* 1994, 89). Each text exists within a vast 'society of texts' in various genres and media: no text is an island entire of itself. A useful semiotic technique is comparison and contrast between differing treatments of similar themes (or similar treatments of different themes), *within* or *between* different genres or media. See Fiske (1987, Chapter 7) for his exploration of intertextuality.

Whilst the term intertextuality would normally be used to refer to allusions to other texts, a related kind of allusion is what might be called 'intratextuality' - involving internal relations within the text. Within a single code (e.g. a photographic code) these would be simply syntagmatic relationships (e.g. the relationship of the image of one person to another within the same photograph). However, a text may involve several codes: a newspaper photograph, for instance, may have a caption (indeed, such an example serves to remind us that

what we may choose to regard as a discrete 'text' for analysis lacks clearcut boundaries: the notion of intertextuality emphasizes that texts have contexts).

In relation to advertisements, Roland Barthes introduced the concept of *anchorage* (Barthes 1977, 37). Linguistic elements can serve to 'anchor' (or constrain) the preferred readings of an image, and conversely the illustrative use of an image can anchor an ambiguous verbal text. The relationship between text and image within a genre may shift over time, as William Leiss and his colleagues note:

> The growing preponderance of visuals in ads has enhanced the ambiguity of meaning embedded in message structures. Earlier advertising usually states its message quite explicitly through the medium of written text..., but starting in the mid-1920s visual representation became more common, and the relationship between text and visual image became complementary - that is, the text explained the visual. In the postwar period, and especially since the early 1960s, the function of text moved away from explaining the visual and towards a more cryptic form, in which text appeared as a kind of 'key' to the visual.
>
> In all, the effect was to make the commercial message more ambiguous; a 'reading' of it depended on relating elements in the ad's internal structure to each other, as well as drawing in references from the external world. (Leiss *et al.* 1990, 199)

Gerard Genette in *Palimpsestes* (1982) proposed the term 'transtextuality' as a more inclusive term than 'intertextuality' (Stam *et al.* 1992, 206-10). He listed five subtypes:

- *intertextuality*: quotation, plagiarism, allusion (Stam *et al.* add 'intratextuality' here, by which they mean a text's allusions to itself);
- *paratextuality*: the relation between a text and its 'paratext' - that which surrounds the main body of the text - such as titles, headings, prefaces, epigraphs, dedications, acknowledgements, footnotes, illustrations, dust jackets, etc.;
- *architextuality*: designation of a text as part of a genre or genres (Genette refers to designation by the text itself, but this could also be applied to its framing by readers);
- *metatextuality*: explicit or implicit critical commentary of one text on another text (metatextuality can be hard to distinguish from the following category);
- *hypotextuality* (Genette's term was *hypertextuality*): the relation between a text and a preceding 'hypotext' - a text or genre on which it is based but which it transforms, modifies, elaborates or extends (including parody, spoof, sequel).

To such a list, computer-based *hypertextuality* should be added: text which can take the reader directly to other texts (regardless of authorship or location).

Claude Lévi-Strauss's notion of the *bricoleur* who appropriates pre-existing materials which are ready-to-hand is now fairly well-known (Lévi-Strauss 1974, 21). The practice of *bricolage* can be seen as operating through several key transformations.

- the *inclusion* of particular elements;
- indirect *allusion* to others;
- the *omission*
    - of what 'goes without saying'; or
    - of what is 'noticeable by its absence';
- the *adaptation* of 'borrowings' by
    - addition;
    - deletion;
    - substitution; or
    - transposition; and finally
- *arrangement*: overall organization, sequencing and emphasis within the text.

Contents

- Contents Page
- Preface
- Introduction
- Signs
- Modality
- Paradigms and syntagms
- Syntagmatic analysis
- Paradigmatic analysis
- Denotation and connotation
- Metaphor and metonymy
- Codes
- Modes of Address
- Articulation
- Intertextuality
- Strengths of semiotic analysis
- Criticisms of semiotic analysis
- D.I.Y. semiotic analysis
- References and suggested reading
- Semiotics links

- Index

Last modified: 06/16/2020 12:57:35